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ABSTRACT

Research on the effects of collective bargaining by library clerical workers indicates that effects are often less dramatic than expected, and that there does not appear to be a single "union effect." Although one study found hefty gains for library workers with collective bargaining agreements, other studies have found no significant gains by the same classes on employees in similar libraries. The bulk of the evidence indicates that there are probably some wage advantages that can be attributed to collective bargaining; however, the gains are not nearly as large as those achieved by workers in other occupations. For example, library workers are estimated to gain 4 to 8% wage improvements through unions as compared to 12-15% increases for workers in industrial occupations. While it is undoubtedly true that unions can slow activities and significantly obstruct progress, several studies have shown that collective bargaining contributes to improved operational efficiency. Increased productivity is thought to result from management's being pressured by a union to be more accountable in a union environment. It is also argued that collective bargaining can improve productivity by opening up communication channels. However, the net effect of collective bargaining on productivity and organizational efficiency is still in doubt. (SD)

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UNIONS FOR ACADEMIC LIBRARY SUPPORT STAFF

James Kusack, Assistant Professor, SCSU

Union organizers try to sell collective bargaining to library workers on the promise of higher wages and improved benefits. Library administrators often resist unions out of concern that organizational efficiency will be buried beneath an avalanche of grievances. Yet the effect of collective bargaining by library employees usually does not live up to either the promises made by the union leaders or the fears of library administrators.

Information collected for Unions for Academic Library Support Staff; Impact on Workers and the Workplace, to be published by Greenwood Press (Fall, 1986), indicate that the effects of collective bargaining by library clerical workers is often less dramatic than expected. There is no single "union effect." The effect of unions on compensation levels, for example, varies greatly across industries and occupations. In general, unions seem to be able to raise the wages of workers in blue-collar, industrial occupations by 12-15 percent. Studies indicate that the margin is less for white-collar workers and still smaller for occupations where employees are predominantly women. The evidence for any "union effect" on library workers is often conflicting. One study found hefty gains for library workers with collective bargaining agreements. Other studies have found no significant gains by the same classes of employees in similar libraries. The bulk of the evidence seems to indicate that there is probably some wage advantage which can be attributed to collective bargaining, but the gains are not nearly as large as those enjoyed by workers in other occupations. The best estimate may be that library support staff employees gain, on the average, something like four to eight percent wage improvements through unions--a figure low enough to bring into question whether improved compensation is adequate motivation to participate in collective bargaining.

The net effect of collective bargaining on productivity and organizational efficiency is also still in doubt. While it is undoubtedly true that unions can slow activities and significantly obstruct progress, several studies have found that collective bargaining contributes to improved operational efficiency. Increased productivity results from the fact that management may be pressured to be more accountable, more "scientific" in its approach to personnel relations in a union environment. For that first time, it may be necessary to articulate and formalize employment policies, to conduct scientific job analysis, and to develop well-structured job classification schemes. Higher union wages in unionized libraries make it more likely that better quality workers will be hired. This and improved training often reduce the turnover rate. Fewer employees leaving the job means

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less disruption and lower hiring and training costs. Furthermore, it is argued that collective bargaining can improve productivity by opening up communication channels between employees and management. Improved flow of information could result in better morale and job satisfaction which, the argument goes, is the product of the union environment. A nationwide survey conducted for this book appear to support these findings. A survey of 182 large university libraries found that support staff employees in 42 libraries (23.9 percent) of those responding were working under union contracts. Approximately the same percentage of privately- and publicly-supported universities reported support staff unions. Over 90 percent of the libraries with unionized support staffs were located in the Northeastern and Pacific regions of the U.S. A second, more in depth analysis of a smaller sample examined compensation patterns, work policies, and other characteristics of the two groups of libraries. This analysis found virtually no statistically significant differences between libraries with unions and those without unions. The data collected did detect slight tendencies for libraries with union contracts to pay somewhat higher starting wages, to grant additional compensation to those employees required to work on holidays, to require fewer hours per week, and to grant more paid holidays, vacation days, and sick leave but these slight variations were not large enough to conclude that they were anything other than random fluctations in the data. The number of libraries, number of support staff employees, and budgets available for materials, personnel and support staff were also not significantly related to unionization.

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